Interview with L. Wade Lathram

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

L. WADE LATHRAM

Interviewed by: William E. Knight

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Q: This is an interview with Wade Lathram on June 2, 1993 and I am William E. Knight. Wade, start off and attack this problem any way you wish.

LATHRAM: Well, when you say problem, I gather we're fairly well agreed that what I'm going to talk about is Vietnam. Two things need to be said about this coverage of that subject. One is that my service there is now 27 years old, and my memory is not what it used to be. Further, I intentionally kept no records or journal. I knew from the outset that much of our communication would be classified and should not be made part of a personal record. So you have to assume that there may be inaccuracies.

Q: Errors and omissions accepted.

LATHRAM: Good. And the second thing I'd like to say is, there have been lots and lots of books written about Vietnam, and arguments and debates on such things as to why we were there, why did we not win, and all that. Much of what I'm going to say does not deal with that subject. To a degree, I can't avoid cause and affect, but my prime interest now is of making a record of how my part at least of the Vietnam program was managed. The part I was particularly engaged in, which was the pacification program. I've long had an interest in management. My undergraduate work was political science, my graduate degree was

public administration, and I went into the government, as I'm sure you did, in the early forties.

Q: Before the war ended in other words.

LATHRAM: Oh, yes, well before the war ended. As a matter of fact I was in state and local government before that. Because I wanted to perform a public service, and there were thousands of men that went in at that time, into government, as a public service.

But, anyway, what I'm trying to say is, during my career and in Vietnam I became involved deeply in substance, but there was always in the background that management bent. And later on, as you may recall, Bill, when I was in the Inspection Corps I tried to emphasize in our inspection work evaluation of the effectiveness with which the embassy and the mission was managed. So, I'd like to focus on that approach to Vietnam.

How did I get to Vietnam? That's an interesting question. I was in the senior seminar in foreign policy in 1965 to '66. I believe you attended the seminar yourself, didn't you?

Q: Yes, '72-'73.

LATHRAM: I was in the eighth seminar, and in May and early June we were wondering, “what's going to be our assignment?” One day I received a call from Ray Hare, who was Assistant Secretary for NEA. And he said, “At the end of your assignment in the senior seminar, how would you like to be Deputy Assistant Secretary in NEA?” And I said, “Great, fine.” A week later I was asked to go see U. Alexis Johnson, who was then Under Secretary for Political Affairs. I went with much trepidation because I had a suspicion as to what the call was about. The first thing he said was, “Dave Bell [who was then administrator of AID] has been to the Secretary, and asked for you for Vietnam.” Secretary Dean Rusk said he could have anybody he wanted. I said, “What does he want me for?” “Deputy Director of the AID mission in Vietnam.” And I said, “But I don't want that. I've a perfectly good assignment in NEA with Ray Hare.” And he said, “No you haven't, I called

the Assignment Board this morning and canceled that one. You have a choice Vietnam or resigning from the Foreign Service."

Q: Really. That's hardball.

LATHRAM: That was hardball, especially for an FSO-1. The old FSO-1 before 1980. My previous assignment of Director of Personnel for AID, came about the same way. I was Economic Counselor in the Embassy in Turkey in 1963. When Bill Crockett, then Under Secretary for Administration; John Macy, head of the Civil Service Commission; and Bill Hall, Foreign Service officer on loan as Deputy Administrator for Administration, for AID, got their heads together and decided I'd make a good AID personnel director. I was at that time given the choice of resigning from the Foreign Service.

What was most annoying to me later, Bill, quite honestly, was the number of times that the public in general, and even those that should have known better, criticized those that went to Vietnam. Most of us went to Vietnam because we were ordered. In the Foreign Service, of course, we accept a global assignment as a responsibility. Certainly that's true with all those in the military.

But to digress for just a second, to show my bitterness on that subject, after I retired in '74 I decided I might like to have a brief tour with the United Nations just to see what it was like. So I contacted the Personnel Administrator for United Nations, whom I knew, and they were very interested in me and my background. I was given an application form to fill out, which you would have to do for any job. But, my friend said, "By the way, don't mention your service in Vietnam." I said, "What?" He said, "It doesn't go well to have served in Vietnam regardless of what you do for the United Nations." I tore up the application, and handed it back to him, and told him on that basis I was not interested.

I didn't want to go to Vietnam. I wasn't convinced then, I wasn't convinced later that it was a winable war. But I'm proud of what I did there, and I wasn't interested in employment in an organization that says I should be ashamed of service there. Anyway, that's the way I

went to Vietnam, as Deputy Director for the AID mission. I asked Dave why he had picked me and made it clear I was angry. He said, “We want you to go to Vietnam to save Charlie Mann who is the Director. He's under fire from the military, particularly from McNamara. We think he's a good Director.” And I said, “Dave, you know there's no way I can go as Deputy Director, and save him. I'll do my best, but that's an impossible task. I don't want to go, but you fixed it so I don't have a choice.

Q: Do you know why he was in such difficulty with McNamara?

LATHRAM: That gets into a little broader area. First, Charlie's own personality was kind of abrasive. I don't know whether you know Charlie Mann or not?

Q: No.

LATHRAM: ...or knew him. He had a rather abrasive personality, he had a Germanic accent much, much stronger than Henry Kissinger's. His French was Germanic French which many in South Asia resented, but AID wanted him there because of his French. McNamara wanted him gotten rid of because he wasn't getting along with General Westmoreland very well on a personal basis. He was also in charge of the pacification program and Westmoreland felt AID was not doing a good job. This is a good point to explain what pacification meant then, and meant later.

Pacification dealt with the villages and hamlets throughout Vietnam in 44 provinces. In short, pacification was concerned with keeping the Viet Cong out of the villages, with keeping the villagers safe, prosperous and on the side of the Vietnamese government. The province chief commanding Vietnamese forces for that province was responsible for helping the villagers and the hamlets with their social development, their economic development, their political participation, and doing its best to get them to be on the government's side. Mao had said the communist revolution would be won by “little fishes

swimming in the sea". The Viet Cong were those little fishes, ever since the early '50s and Dien Ben Phu and were then known as Viet Minh.

Frankly, the villagers in Vietnam, right from the beginning, wanted to be let alone. They didn't like the government. The government meant taxation, and control to the villager. But he didn't like the Viet Cong trying to persuade him to go to a different form of government, a communist regime, an authoritarian regime. And the persuasive technique used by the Viet Cong was brutal. My maid in Saigon left the Delta. Her father owned a fine farm, she said, in the Delta, but in the early days with the Viet Minh, the French government had come to him for taxes. The Viet Minh had come to him for taxes. He said, "I can't pay you both, not and live. So I won't pay any." He was taken out by the Viet Minh one night, and shot, and that left her and her mother with no hope of making a living. The Viet Minh men took over their farm, and she came to Saigon. I said the villages wanted to be let alone. But, if he wasn't, the villagers wanted anything, if he was given a preference, it was with the government. That was demonstrated in spades in '67 with the first real general election, and with the ongoing refugee program.

But the job of pacification meant the Vietnamese had to do it, with our advice, and guidance, and help. And the prime instruments for that purpose were the AID mission, USIA at the field level, and CIA with its own activities at the field level. They were all putting pressure on helping the Vietnamese, but the Vietnamese had to do it themselves. This the American military, quite frankly, had trouble understanding. We had the main military force U.S. activities there from Westmoreland on down. In effect the latter said, "We're here to help the Vietnamese win the war, yes, but we can win it for them." You couldn't do that with a pacification program. McNamara and the Westmoreland command mutually felt that pacification was not succeeding. The villagers were not being pacified, the Viet Cong were all over the country. And why weren't they being pacified? Because the American civilians weren't doing the job.

Q: This is what they felt, what the Americans felt.

LATHRAM: This is what the U.S. military, the Pentagon and the White House felt, and therefore Charlie Mann, heading the pacification program through AID, was failing. That's the reason they wanted to get rid of Charlie.

Q: This might be a good time to describe the organization structure of the effort in regions and provinces, etc.

LATHRAM: When I laid the groundwork from what I just said, for the fact that then, and later, organization structure for the pacification program became all important. It was the thing on which the White House, the Pentagon, Westmoreland, the embassy and the Ambassador, all focused. How are we going to organize the American pacification effort? At the time I went to Vietnam it was organized in separate agencies, extending from the headquarters of each agency down through the provinces to the villages and hamlets. AID had its own staffs, with a province senior advisor in each province carrying out the AID program.

Q: And he would have a staff?

LATHRAM: He would have a staff.

Q: How big might that staff be?

LATHRAM: Oh, that might usually be fifteen or twenty civilians, sometimes more.

Q: Including secretarial.

LATHRAM: No. At the province level there were very few secretaries. It was pretty hairy, you know. Let me back up, and point out one thing. Even in '64 and '65, it was impossible for Americans to drive the highways from one spot to another. You went by air. When you were in the province the American personnel had to be very careful...everybody had his jeep...and personnel had to be very careful about what villages and hamlets they visited,

because they might be ambushed on the way. You know, it's awfully easy to destroy, and very hard to build.

Let me digress to emphasize that point. The Vietnamese had what they called a revolutionary development training center at Vungtao. I think it was about 50 miles from Saigon on the coast. [looking at map] Here is Saigon, here is Vungtao. As I recall there were about twelve bridges on the highway. They were all out of operation, destroyed. When I arrived in Vietnam the only way we could get to Vungtao was by helicopter. There, with CIA's support and help, they trained revolutionary development workers, Vietnamese workers, to work in the villages and help them with their problems, and try to get them to be with the government.

At that time the Vietnamese had two battalions of ARVN troops (ARVN stands for the Army of the Republic of Vietnam), that's about a thousand men guarding that highway. But they couldn't keep it open. Everytime they'd build a bridge it would get blown up. Vietnam intelligence finally caught one Viet Cong sapper. A sapper is a guy who plants explosives. They caught one sapper. ARVN rebuilt those bridges and for about three months one could drive to Vungtao. At the end of that time the Viet Cong were able to insert another sapper. A thousand armed men could not keep that road open in the face of one sapper. It's easy to destroy, and it's very hard to build. That's just an example of what the problem was all about.

Essentially, the organization structure for each of these civilian agencies, CIA, AID, USIA, was the same. They worked from their headquarters organization in Saigon to the provinces, and there were 44 of them all over. In addition, MAVC, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, which was General Westmoreland's U.S. military organization, had military advisers in each province, and district, advising the village and hamlet protective forces, the Popular Forces and the Regional Forces.

Q: There was a regional structure also, wasn't there Wade?

LATHRAM: Yes, thank you for reminding me of that. There were four Corps areas, established by the Vietnamese, patterned after the U.S. idea of military organization. I Corps in the north, II Corps in the middle, III Corps both sides of Saigon, and IV Corps which was the Delta. And within each Corps were a number of provinces.

Q: So the provinces had to report through the regions to headquarters.

LATHRAM: Right, and that was true with the civilian organization. It was also true with the military. But the military was more cohesive. The Marines had the I Corps, and all of the Marines were in I Corps. The U.S. Army was in the other three Corps areas. The Navy had personnel relating to III Corps and IV Corps, but they were in and out. Some of them, as I recall...I'm not sure about this, because I didn't pay too much attention to the military part of it...as I recall it, they did have Navy personnel assigned to some of the Army units, but by and large they were separate too. But they were still fighting the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese military directly, and so were the ARVN fighting directly. The U.S. military also had advisory services working with the Regional Forces and Popular Forces as I said before. They provided local security against the Viet Cong. The Popular Forces were recruited from the villages and hamlets which they were protecting. The same thing was true with the Regional Forces of the province.

When I went there as Deputy Director of the AID mission that's the structure I found.

Q: And who was the Ambassador at that moment?

LATHRAM: The Ambassador was Henry Cabot Lodge. He was succeeded by Ellsworth Bunker in '67.

Q: He had Fritz Nolting in effect bounced because he wanted the job, as I recall.

LATHRAM: Yes, that's right.

Q: It was a political power play.

LATHRAM: And it was related, of course, to the elimination of the man who was the Ambassador at Diem's assassination and the CIA chief, Jock Richardson—who, by the way, is a great guy. He's now retired and living in Mexico. I keep in touch with him. He was later station chief in Korea when I was first there. I had tremendous respect for Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker. He succeeded Lodge while I was still there. I cannot say I had the same respect for Henry Cabot Lodge. Should I tell an anecdote?

Q: By all means.

LATHRAM: When I was in the AID mission early on, Charlie Mann for some reason was called to Washington for consultation, and I was Acting Director. We had a problem then, a physical problem in Saigon with the AID mission. We were scattered in many buildings. There came an opportunity to have one office building in which we'd put all the AID personnel. Whatever happened to that, I don't know, because I went on to other things later. But anyway, there was a contractor willing to build a building if we would provide the money to be subtracted by rentals. Then after we left he would become the owner. We could get our building, and get organized, and get together. But we needed a recommendation to Washington. Washington had to approve it, of course. We needed a recommendation from the Ambassador. Normally Bill Porter, who was Deputy Ambassador, would have been the man we would go to. But he was out of town. I felt it was urgent, so I asked Ambassador Lodge for an appointment, and he said yes. I took a briefing team, you know in Vietnam everybody liked a dog and pony show with charts and graphs. So I took a team and explained the problem to the Ambassador. When we finished the Ambassador said, “I'll think it over.” I said, “Fine, Mr. Ambassador, I would like to send a telegram this afternoon if it's at all possible.” As I headed the crew out the door, the Ambassador said, “Wade, can you wait a minute?” So I said, “Certainly,” I closed the door and turned around and the Ambassador was standing behind his desk, fists down, his face red, and he said, “Wade, why do you bring problems like this to me? You know I don't

like to make decisions." I said to myself, "my, my, my." This man aspires to be president of the United States? Well, he wasn't quite reflecting his total attitude because I had seen him make decisions but generally when there was full support already existing.

Q: Not the doubtful cases.

LATHRAM: So I went back to the office and I thought about it, and sent the telegram anyway. I said in the telegram, as I recall it, "The Ambassador does not disagree." And I let it go at that.

Q: Did he call you in? Did he disagree with your telegram?

LATHRAM: No, I never heard another word about it. A little bit later on I was at a reception one night...this was in '66 when we were still having receptions, when the war started getting a little hotter there were no longer any receptions. This one was a military reception by the Vietnamese government, lots of U.S. military, and lots of U.S. civilians there. Later it became a little dangerous. There was quite a bit of bombing in Saigon, and every night, of course, mortaring. Anyway, one reception I went to, I happened to overhear two American generals, one talking to the other one saying, "Aren't we fortunate that we have an Ambassador for whom the military can do no wrong."

Well, as a matter of fact, in his book General Westmoreland does point out that there were a couple of issues, and a couple fairly important issues, where he and Ambassador Lodge disagreed, and he was finally able to persuade Ambassador Lodge to his point of view. So maybe I'm not being entirely fair.

Q: We've just had a bit of an interruption. We're starting again. Wade, go ahead.

LATHRAM: To return to the real problem for the Americans, civilian and military, it then, as it always was later, when should the Americans do the job for the Vietnamese? And when should we expect the Vietnamese to do the job? We would advise them, provide

the money and material, help them as much as we could. In the pacification program we always felt that there was only one way that the Vietnamese villages all over the country, hundreds and hundreds of villages, could be protected, could be secure, only one way in which the peasants could live a peaceful life, and that was if the Vietnamese did it themselves. We could not put Americans in every village, in the first place, and again we couldn't distinguish between a Viet Cong and a non-Viet Cong in a village. They both wore black pajamas. Only the villager could tell who was a Viet Cong.

Q: In fact, could they tell? Or were some of the Viet Cong under such deep cover that...

LATHRAM: Oh, it's possible—the latter is possible—but after all when you've lived in a village for four generations you've got a pretty good idea of whose who.

Q: They would be a stranger, they would not be villagers.

LATHRAM: Not unless they had been converted. And if they had been converted, you would know that too. No, only the villagers could tell which in the villages were Viet Cong and which were not. But the villagers wouldn't tell the government, because armed Viet Cong would come in at night, and isolate a family, and tell the parents, “We're going to take your son tonight. And if you don't cooperate in the future, we'll kill him.” They'd tell the son, “You become a good Viet Cong, and we protect your parents and help them. And if you don't, we'll hurt them.” This was one of the recruiting techniques for getting a village, and the young fellows from the village to become Viet Cong. And the parents feared for their kids.

Q: Doesn't this raise a question of whether even the Vietnamese themselves could never win that way because of this kind of pressure? Even if you left it all to them to do.

LATHRAM: Well, take it the other way. I'm not sure I can answer that question. They would have to want independence, and believe the government wanted independence for them, strong enough to resist as eventually they did in South Korea. If they really

were convinced by the Viet Cong that their future would be more secure, safer, and more prosperous with the Viet Cong, the Communist regime, that's the way they'd go. They'd have to be convinced that the Viet Cong government was better. The only thing I can tell you though as a measure is that long after I was there it was still true, that anytime a village was evacuated, a valley was evacuated, for whatever reason, whether they were chased down by the North Vietnamese army, or they were chased out by the Viet Cong, or they were chased out by the Americans, or the ARVN, or whether they could no longer stand the shelling and the fighting, whenever the villager left his village he went to the government camp as a refugee. There were no refugee camps by the Viet Cong, or the North Vietnamese. There were only refugee camps by the Vietnamese government with American support. And for a refugee camp we provided reinforcing bars, ten sheets of corrugated roofing, ten sacks of rice, two sacks of cement, to each family. They could build their own hut then in a refugee camp—cut down some poles, make a structure, put a roof on it, pour concrete slabs for a floor, have rice, and start over again. At any point throughout the countryside we might have as many as several hundred thousand refugees in camps. The villagers always found succor when they went to the government. They weren't too sure about the other side.

Now, let's get back to organization structure. I arrived there in June of '66. By I'd say, September-October things had heated up in terms of the argument of how we should be organized on the pacification side. Secretary McNamara and the White House were pushing very hard on the mission. The first step that was taken was to designate Deputy Ambassador Porter as the man in charge of the pacification effort. He was supposed to coordinate and pull together these disparate civilian agencies. Let's back up for just a second. I've explained the AID structure.

The USIA presence in Saigon was through JUSPAO, a Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office. There was an early agreement that there was no point in having several spokesmen on the U.S. side. So it was agreed that all public pronouncements and news reporter briefings would be by JUSPAO, the Joint Public Affairs Office, to which military personnel were

assigned. All public statements that involved the military, or military action, were cleared by the military, but there was a daily briefing by the head of JUSPAO of all U.S. and foreign reporters. “The 5:00 follies” they called them, and Barry Zorthian was the head of JUSPAO as long as I was there. He turned out to be a pretty good friend in the long run, although he and I fought a lot. JUSPAO, for USIA, had public affairs officers in each province who were also responsible for “psychological warfare” or psywar. This consisted mainly of preparing leaflet drops to persuade Viet Cong to defect.

Defense Secretary McNamara visited and asked for a briefing on the pacification effort. The pacification effort involved the activities that I've mentioned earlier. It also included the Central Intelligence Agency, not only gathering intelligence but helping the Vietnamese identify the Viet Cong in the villages and helping to support the training program of the Revolutionary Development Support Cadre. Ambassador Porter was coordinating all these programs. But based on Secretary McNamara's report of his briefing, Washington still wasn't convinced that pacification was improving.

So in November 1966 a major effort to reorganize was done under Ambassador Porter. He selected two young Foreign Service officers, Frank Wisner and Paul Hare who were very, very good and have since gone on to become Ambassadors in their own right. They came up with an idea of how to amalgamate these various organizations, and proposed an organization called Office of Civil Operations, OCO, in which all activities of a civilian nature outside of Saigon itself, would be organized in one organization structure.

Personnel and funds from State, CIA, AID, USIA, were all to be put into the organization if the activity was outside of Saigon. And the same thing would be true at each province, and district level. I was asked to head OCO, reporting to Deputy Ambassador Porter. This was an unusual public administration experiment, and it worked from a management viewpoint of directing American efforts.

I think I was just mentioning that one of the advisors in a province in I Corps wrote a song book—songs about OCO. Frankly, we were rather proud of our structure.

I'd like to back up for just a second. I had many arguments with the heads of these various organizations, JUSPAO, AID, CIA, because what we were doing in OCO and later in CORDS was taking their people, and their money, and running an organization over which we had the control, while they had the backstop responsibility. So, of course, there were lots of arguments. At one point Don MacDonald, who was Director of the AID mission, in a moment of exasperation, said to me, “I'm spending 20 million dollars a year on Air America and I have to get your permission to fly.” Yes, there was that.

Also, some of us had a lot of questions that we just really couldn't answer. Years later, Barry Zorthian (JUSPAO Director during my tour), wrote a letter to me. In it he says, “Our task was to take the assignment we'd been given as Foreign Service officers and convert a mandarin, intrigue filled society, into a functioning, responsive government, pushing economic and political development for a largely rural population that was honeycombed with a very effective anti-government guerrilla force...All of us from that period have gone our separate ways, keeping within us the unforgettable memories of the days we served together. Enjoy them Mary and Wade for another 50 years. And dust off so very often for private remembrance those days in Vietnam when we paid our dues in what turned out to be an impossible task.”

For almost 20 years I had trouble talking about Vietnam to anybody that hadn't been there at the same time I was. I just couldn't talk about it. We were all working 14 to 16 hour days, 6 and 7 days a week—both in Saigon and the provinces. And these weren't just another day at the office. We were civilians, but we were in a war. No place was safe. Many were killed, shot, mined, mortared. We had to be careful. We weren't like the front-line U.S. troops, but life was stressful. As Barry says, we bottled up remembrances within ourselves about a period in which we paid our dues trying to do an impossible task. OCO was one of those tasks, and we tried our best during that period that OCO was in existence to make

it function, and I think we did a very good job. We had a headquarters staff put together in the structure that had been devised by Frank Wisner and Paul Hare, and approved by Ambassador Porter. I was head of the organization, reported to Bill Porter, and we worked alongside the American military structure.

This kept on from November 23rd 1966 when it was announced by the Ambassador, until almost summer of the following year, until May of 1967. However, there was considerable unhappiness still in the defense establishment, and in the White House, with what we were doing in OCO because they could see that security was not improving for the villages, that the Viet Cong were still active all over the country, in addition to the North Vietnamese forces, the main force war was being fought by American troops, as well as the Vietnamese troops. Pacification was not working. In short, I have to say, the country was not being pacified. Yes, that was true. The villages and hamlets were involved in the big war where thousands of people were killed, but many Americans were killed in trying to go among the villages. You never knew when boobie traps were going to be set along the dike that you were walking on, and we had incidents of frustrated American troops shooting at water buffalo of the villagers. They couldn't tell who was a Viet Cong, and who wasn't. A friendly villager might have just planted a “bouncing Betty” mine to blow off a soldier's legs. The U.S. military talked about “winning the hearts and minds” of the people, but the U.S. soldier was there for a year, the villager for a lifetime. Yes, pacification was not working.

Q: Let me interject a question here. To what extent were the projects that you would build under the pacification program, to what extent did they survive into the later peacetime era? Or were they almost always destroyed by the Viet Cong, bridges and things?

LATHRAM: We rarely built anything. We advised the Vietnamese on how to build. Yes, they were destroyed if they were bridges and things like that. We helped village chiefs, for example. We showed them how to organize for an election. In the old days they didn't need to be shown. Each village has its own council, which was an organization

developed by the village to run the village, but they lost much of the political will to organize themselves in the turmoil and chaos. We were advising them through our people in their local villages on how to organize for political strength. We were teaching them how to organize for economic development. We were providing through our agriculture people better seed, better techniques, etc. But yes, the whole purpose of the Viet Cong was to disrupt anything that the Vietnamese government was doing to help the people. And our job was to help the Vietnamese officials help the people. Sometimes we helped the people directly, but it was still advisory. That was one of the problems, of course. That was the name of the game, it always has been the name of the game that you can't do things for people, they have to do it for themselves if they're going to be permanent. But, as I said, General Westmoreland, the Pentagon and McNamara, the White House, felt that somehow, the American civilian pacification program was failing (even though village security was by Vietnamese forces being advised by U.S. military).

A conference was planned for March in Guam for the President and his staff—the U.S. President Lyndon Johnson—to review the situation. What was happening in Vietnam? Actually, as Westmoreland points out in his book, one of the main purposes of the conference was to review the pacification program, and its organization and structure because McNamara for some time had been proposing that the American military take over the pacification program. What that was supposed to mean was simply that the military could do a better job than the civilians had been doing on pacification, without recognizing that the problem with the pacification program was lack of security. That it wasn't a job that the Americans could do for the Vietnamese.

Anyway, I went to the Guam conference.

Q: This is '67.

LATHRAM: This was '67, March of '67. The President was there, and outside the hearing of the President, we had a meeting. Secretary McNamara, Ambassador Lodge, General

Westmoreland, Bob Komer representing the White House, General Knowlton and others, including staff were there. Bob Komer, incidentally, had initially come out of CIA but was the right-hand man in the White House for Lyndon Johnson on the pacification program in Vietnam. Among other developments, he was keeping up on such things as the terrorism and atrocities that the Viet Cong were engaged in. For example, it was nothing to see a busload of children destroyed by a Viet Cong rocket, that sort of thing. Any effort to persuade the villagers that they were going to have to go with the Viet Cong was legitimate for them.

Secretary McNamara led the session, and we discussed the organization of the pacification effort.

I had come prepared, by the way, to brief Secretary McNamara on what OCO was doing with the usual graphs and charts. I told him when he got off the plane that I was prepared to give a briefing on the subject and he said he'd like to have it. After the conference, he took me aside and apologized because he had never had time to go over the briefing that I had prepared for him. Of course, I wasn't fooled. That wasn't what he wanted. He wanted to change the organization; he didn't want to be convinced that OCO was a good organization.

But to return to the pre-Presidential meeting, I was cautioned by Lodge and Komer not to upset the apple cart by arguing against any change in the structure. However, as a matter of fact, in the discussion, I did speak my piece.

Q: Was Bill Porter there too?

LATHRAM: No, Bill Porter was not there at the Guam session. He was left in charge of the mission so Ambassador Lodge could go. When the President said he was ready to receive us, we joined him. Secretary McNamara explained the problem of organization for pacification. (Actually I'd seen Secretary McNamara and President Johnson off in the corridor discussing something before then.) The President turned to me, and said, “Do

you have any comment?" At that point I realized that there wasn't any purpose in fighting and arguing about a made decision, so I said, "No, I have nothing further to say." So then he turned to the rest of the group, and said, "I've got to make a decision, and I haven't made it yet. I'll let you know." Well, I was pretty sure that the decision was already made, but he wasn't ready to announce it. As a matter of fact, it turned out that he wanted to announce it with the change in ambassadors when he was ready to send Ellsworth Bunker out to replace Lodge. So the decision to put the civilian pacification effort in MACV was announced at that time.

On the plane on the way back to Saigon from Guam, General Westmoreland came and sat down with me, and we talked a little bit. And then he said, "If the President decides to give me the job of pacification, will you take it on on my staff? If you will, I'll give you a general as your deputy."

I have to digress for just a second. Sometime before that he had been concerned about how to organize the military advisory effort for pacification, and assigned General Knowlton to work on the subject. General Knowlton set up the Revolutionary Development Support Command in MACV for that purpose. MACV was the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. All through the war, even when we had 500,000 combat troops, they were still organized under an "Assistance" Command, Vietnam. General Knowlton had the job of organizing and directing the Regional Forces and Popular Forces advisors, in Revolutionary Development Support. Westmoreland proposed that we combine OCO and the organization for which General Knowlton was responsible into one of the staff organizations of MACV, with me as its chief, and Knowlton as my deputy. He asked if I would resign from the Foreign Service, or would I stay and do that? I said I was ordered to Vietnam in the first place, I didn't come in the Service to duck responsibility, and yes, I would if that was the President's decision. I would take it over.

Q: It could have been an out of Service assignment. You would have always been able to get back into the Service when it was over, wouldn't you?

LATHRAM: No, it had to be a Foreign Service assignment, on detail. The issue was whether to leave Vietnam. I would have had to resign from the Service to do that. I was to continue to be a Foreign Service officer working in MACV, and that's the way it turned out. One of my sons asked me, “Just exactly what was your title, Dad?” I said, “Do you want my full title? It was Assistant Chief of Staff for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam.”

What was involved was a typical staff and line military organization. The CORDS staff (Civil Operation Revolutionary Development Support), along with G-1, G-2, G-3, and G-4 staffs under the chief of staff of MACV, who reported then to the Deputy Commander, and the Commander MACV, General Westmoreland. While I was there General Abrams came as deputy Commander, MACV, and he eventually took over from Westmoreland.

Then at the Corps level, I, II, III, and IV Corps, there would be a CORDS Assistant Chief of Staff under the U.S. military Corps commander, and each province would be in charge of an American senior advisor. There was a complete amalgamation of four U.S. military and four civilian organizations. It would have been very difficult to organize that if OCO had not been established in the first place, because we had already amalgamated, outside of Saigon, all the civilian organizations. And General Knowlton had amalgamated the military advisory forces at the province and district levels.

Q: Did all of the OCO components flow into this new organization?

LATHRAM: Yes. Now, at the announcement of this new setup, Bob Komer came out from Washington because, as he told me, “President Johnson said, okay you've been advising me on pacification, now you get out there and do it.” As you'll note from the Westmoreland memoirs, he'd already acquired the nickname of “blowtorch”. He insisted on being a deputy to Westmoreland with the rank of ambassador. At first he wanted to have a general officer rank—four stars. Well, they wouldn't give that to him because he wasn't in the military, so he designed his own logo with the help of the Chief of Staff, of four

stars in a circle. But he carried the rank of Ambassador as Deputy Commander, MACV for CORDS. I was assistant chief of staff for CORDS under the chief of staff with all the Saigon organization under me. Actually, it was much more an operational organization than a staff organization, and at one point 50% of all the communication, all the mail, all the paperwork of MACV headquarters was CORDS because we had a direct relation to the Corps and province structures, which included the refugee, defector, development, public safety, psychological and Regional and Popular Force advisory programs. And, of course, CORDS had a separate Air America program for passengers and freight. The total staff of CORDS at the time I left was roughly 2400 American civilians, 1000 U.S. military, and 4000 third country nationals—Vietnamese, Philippines, and Koreans.

After CORDS was formed Komer sponsored the development of the Hamlet Evaluation System. This was computerization of every village and hamlet in Vietnam to show whether or not it was secure, or insecure, or partly secure, what its status was. The HES staff of CORDS received a weekly report from all the district advisors as to the status of each village and hamlet. They got their information by visiting the villages and hamlets, or from Vietnamese officers, usually the latter. A lot of faith was put in that hamlet evaluation system. But, of course, as with any system of this character, the information is only as good as the basic data that's given to be put in the system. I went out to test it to a couple of places. I remember when I went to one CORDS district adviser, and I said, “Let's take a jeep and drive out to this hamlet.” “No, not me.” I said, “But you reported that hamlet green.” He said, “That's what the ARVN commander told me. He said it was secure. But as far as I'm concerned it's not, I'm not going to drive out there.” I said, “How do you know it's not secure?” He said, “The hamlet chief isn't there. He certainly doesn't sleep there.” This was one of our major criteria...any village or hamlet where the chief, and they were elected by the villagers, didn't sleep there at night, was not secure. But, what was reported in the Hamlet Evaluation System was the information given to the district advisor to report to Saigon, and that's what he reported.

Q: I suppose they were under pressure to pretend that things were going well, generally speaking.

LATHRAM: We had great big maps, color maps of all the villages and hamlets, and lots and lots of green, but all that green was misleading.

Q:This was Komer's idea?

LATHRAM: I don't know whose idea it was. Komer sponsored its use, but certainly not its inaccuracy. But it was endorsed from the White House on down as a system for trying to determine...everybody was grasping for some measure, and this would be a measure of how pacification was succeeding, or not succeeding. And it was that basis that General Westmoreland had to use when he appeared before the joint session of Congress in December of 1967, to say there was light at the end of the tunnel. Of course, a month later was the Tet campaign.

At any rate, back to one of the major problems I had was Bob Komer's pride in being a blowtorch. He was a brilliant man, terrific brain, but a huge ego, and his idea of effective management was to demand, scream, and yell at the nearest subordinate. He figured the only way to get action was to burn the Americans, and tremendous pressure was put on the Americans any place where there wasn't sufficient progress (and that was everywhere). What we were supposed to achieve by putting pressure on the Americans I was never quite clear, and neither were they. But we were always constantly being chewed out by Komer. I felt one of my jobs was to try to be a buffer between him and my staff. I didn't always succeed, but it was still stressful.

Tet was a real, real surprise. For the month of January there was a lot of euphoria, a lot of good feeling among the Vietnamese leadership, and among the headquarters of MACV, which many of us felt in the CORDS program was not fully justified. There were intelligence reports coming in through the Vietnamese to the effect that something was

stirring. Something was going to happen. But these reports were few and not verified. Tet was coming along, and historically all firing stopped, all fighting stopped at this Chinese/ Vietnamese New Year. It was a gentlemen's agreement that nobody attack anybody during this religious celebration.

Q: Peace of God.

LATHRAM: Yes, right. But there were indications that something might happen. And so many of our province senior advisors were concerned.

Oh, I want to back up on this, our province senior advisors. There were 44 provinces, and at the time General Westmoreland was talking to me on the way back from Guam about possible organization, he said, “I've General Knowlton and he would be your Deputy.” General Westmoreland had talked to him about whether or not he would be willing to be my deputy. Well, he hadn't known me but he said yes, of course, and we became very close, and very good friends. Incidentally, he went on to become Commandant at West Point, and then retired as Commandant of our U.S. forces in Europe.

General Westmoreland went on to say that, of course, the Corps Commanders would select the province senior adviser, either military or OCO civilian. He would expect 3 or 4 to be civilians. In fact, most of the selected seniors were civilians. But importantly, all the province U.S. military and civilians worked well together.

Back to Tet, 1968. There had been a couple of attacks on the 29th of January 1968, but nothing like the real thing! I was living in an apartment in town. I'd declined to have the house that was designated for the deputy director of the AID mission because we had four men living in it, and I didn't see any point in taking over that house. So I had an apartment, and across the street from the apartment building was the residence of the AID director, Donald McDonald, and next to me was the residence of the administrative officer, and his Deputy Director of the AID mission. At any rate, I was on top of the roof with everybody else in the apartment building watching the city on January 30th at midnight when the

fireworks went off. And if you've never seen a Tet celebration, it's incredible. At the stroke of midnight, fireworks went off all over town. It seemed as though all of Saigon lifted a foot in the air. We enjoyed the celebration, went down and went to bed. And along about 2:30 I guess it was, I heard firing, and explosions. Fortunately I had all kinds of communication gear in my apartment and they started sounding off. My first thought, I don't know why, I thought that darn Nguyen Cao Ky, the vice president, was trying to stage a military coup and take over the government. Why that thought would enter my mind, I don't know. Very shortly came the news that the Palace was under attack and so was the Embassy. This was the night that they blew in the Embassy doors, and the Marines defended it very successfully. About 4:00 a.m. I called my good friend Colonel Jacobson, Special Assistant to the Ambassador, who was living in a house on the Embassy compound, and he said, “You wouldn't believe I'm a retired Army colonel, and I don't have a weapon in sight.” Well, eventually a couple of the Marines ran across the yard, one of them threw him a .45—he was on the second floor—and he got the .45 just as a Viet Cong was coming up the stairs, and he killed him. It was a rough night. At the same time the back door of McDonald's house was blown in, and there was firing all around my apartment.

That was the night that 38 of the 44 province capitals were attacked. Believe it or not, throughout the entire country it was a coordinated attack, with massive weaponry. No wonder the Vietnamese military intelligence was getting rumors that something was going to happen. Good Lord, imagine that! The Viet Cong placement of ammo, and weaponry in those 38 capitals sufficient to mount an integrated attack was quite an achievement.

Q: Well, an amazing thing is that the intelligence wouldn't have known about it.

LATHRAM: That's right. We could not understand the euphoria, and of course, our budget didn't call for that kind of support for the pacification program. Actually, we ended up supporting nearly a million refugees. Incidentally, the third day General Westmoreland called me on the phone and said, “Don't you need some air support, some help?” I said, “No, frankly General we have stockpiled rice, cement, roofing, and I have a million piasters

in the hands of every province senior advisor to help with any such emergency as this. No, we're in pretty good shape."

Q: How much money in dollars?

LATHRAM: Something like $50,000. I don't remember the exchange rate right now. Lou Wisner, as head of the refugees, was disaster coordinator, and had done a terrific job in anticipating what emergency requirements might be, and all over the country had stockpiled both money, and resources. Of course, that night things were pretty tight around my apartment. I was not attacked, but the Vietnamese had found a claymore mine stuck on the side of my apartment building just shortly before Christmas. And right at Christmas time, as one of the servants was going home, she noticed a Christmas package that apparently had bounced off a bicycle, but actually was leaning against the apartment building. So she called the attention of the police outpost that was right across the street to it; they called the bomb squad, and sure enough it was explosives. My apartment building was surrounded by barbed wire.

Back to Tet evening, as I've said, the AID director's house was attacked. He called me frantically on the telephone about 4:00 in the morning. I was on the radio and the telephone all night long with my staff, and he said, "What do I do now? I want to come over to your place." I said, "Why?" And he said, "They've just blown in the back door with a rocket. I'm afraid they're going to attack." He was there by himself, and I said, "No, don't come over here Don because you would have to negotiate barb wire, and there's a police post in front. You might get shot, they don't know who you are. Call Bill Wild, right across the street from you, and run over there and get with them. They're armed, there's four or five men in the house." So that's what he did. And, of course, my driver didn't show up for a month. He was Vietnamese.

Two days later I decided to drive out to my office in MACV headquarters at Ton Son Nhut airport. But I called my Exec, Colonel Fitzpatrick to tell him I was on the way. Of course I

had the windows closed, in those days we were supposed to keep the windows up and the air conditioning on because a favorite pastime was a motor bike or bicycle with two guys, one riding behind with grenades, he'd throw them through open windows. So we had to keep our windows closed and couldn't hear noise. About half way there the radio came on frantically, it was Fitzpatrick, and he said, “Where are you?” And I told him I was on the main highway, he said, “You're driving right in the middle of a firefight. Between you and MACV there's the ARVN on one side, and North Vietnamese on the other side. There's a firefight across the highway.” So I turned around and went back.

The next day General Westmoreland sent two jeep loads of GIs armed to pick me up, and take me out there. Anyway that's the way I got out to MACV, and my office. I spent the month of February sleeping on a cot in my office, always fully dressed, always fully armed, and everytime there was an attack getting outside to the bunker. We were all doing that, we all lived on “C” rations, and all the general officers were there. I was technically a major general at that point because that was the rank of an “Assistant Chief of Staff”.

My wife and I had agreed that February 20th we would celebrate our 25th wedding anniversary in Hawaii. On the 20th of February I was at my desk dictating a tape to my wife, with my helmet, my AK-40 and my F-16 on my side. I was in fatigues, ready to hit the bunker outside if a mortar attack came. Sure enough, an attack came, and rocket shrapnel was sprayed across my ceiling and I hit the bunker outside. None of us were injured. Strangely enough General Knowlton and I counted 120 holes surrounding MACV headquarters the next morning. Not one of them hit the building. Crazy!

Of course, the American personnel, civilian and military in the provinces had a much more difficult time. Many were shot and several, especially in Hue, were captured and became POWs. I was proud of the many heroic actions performed by CORDS staff officers.

One other point I should make on CORDS organization structure. The military tour was one year, and the military assigned to CORDS were anxious to get out. We had few re-ups or returns for a second tour.

Q: Was this because they thought it wasn't useful to their career record?

LATHRAM: That's right.

Q: They wanted to be combat.

LATHRAM: That's right. If they're going to be in Vietnam, they wanted credit for being in Vietnam, and here they were in CORDS in a staff organization so one year was enough. I had to go back to Washington on consultation, and I asked my staff, “What can I do?” The Chief of Evaluation Section was a colonel. The deputy director of the program staff was a Colonel. They both said, “Try to get the military in Washington, the Pentagon, to agree that service in CORDS is command experience.”

So when I was back there in Washington, I had consultations at the Executive Office building, of course, but I also made it a point to go over to the Pentagon, and I saw General Johnson who was then Chief of Staff of the Army. He said, “What can I do to help you?” I said, “There's one thing you can do. If there's any way possible to decree that military personnel assigned to CORDS will have it shown on their efficiency reports as 'command experience' it would help us.” After all I said, they are exercising initiative, making decisions, commanding actions. He called in his G-1, and that order was issued. That was appreciated and the second tour request rate went up from zilch to nearly 100% overnight. The military assigned to CORDS loved the work they were doing, but it was not furthering their careers. But getting credit for command experience won. That made it possible for us to keep the best military on the job, and that was an achievement. You talk about management, this is the kind of thing you have to do.

Q: And they were checking off the right boxes.

LATHRAM: On their efficiency reports, yes. We were organized the best we could possibly be organized to do the advisory job that had to be done, but there was no way the Americans could pacify the country for the Vietnamese. That was our basic problem, and it continued to be the problem.

Q: We are just about at the end of this side. Are you going to continue on with other matters?

LATHRAM: I think this is probably enough, don't you?

Q: Well, it makes a nice unit. So you left when?

LATHRAM: To finish it up, I left the first of April of 1968. I was succeeded as Assistant Chief of Staff for CORDS by Bill Colby. He was called out by Komer to succeed me, and fortunately I had written to Bill that it would be nice if he could come. Later he moved up to replace Komer when the latter was made Ambassador to Turkey. I don't remember when Colby left to return to Washington.

Q: Later head of CIA.

LATHRAM: ...later head of CIA. Before he came to Vietnam he had unfortunately broken his ankle skiing on the canal in Washington, so he was delayed. But he was able to come out a month early, and we mutually agreed that rather than sit at my desk and break in by sitting alongside me for a month, he should take the opportunity to visit each province, meet and come to know the CORDS staff and Vietnam first hand. Thus ended my role in Vietnam.

End of interview